Myron Weiner

Assam and its Migrants

Introduction

FOR more than a century India's north-eastern state of Assam has been India's frontier area, not simply in the literal sense as a border state touching Burma, Tibet, Bhutan and Bangladesh, but also as a new land attracting millions of settlers from other regions of the subcontinent. This was not an empty land for it contained the Assamese, an Indo-Aryan agricultural people living in the Brahmaputra valley, and a variety of tribal people in the surrounding hills, all of whom had lived for six centuries under the rule of Independent Ahom kings, a people of Shan origin who had been culturally absorbed as Hindus by those whom they had conquered. Under the Ahoms, Assam had a heterogeneous social order whose central principle of social organization was one of maintaining stability through a social hierarchy which had at the top the Ahom aristocracy and monarchy.

Ahom rule was brought to an end, after a short-lived Burmese conquest, by British conquest in the 1820s. For the first time in six centuries Assam was politically a part of India. Into this low density region came millions of settlers from Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab, Nepal and, most of all, from Bengal, occupying land, moving into plantations, entering bureaucracy, starting new businesses and trade, taking up modern professions of teaching, law, medicine and journalism. Since the turn of the 20th century, nearly six and a half million migrants and their descendents have settled in Assam. The population was slightly under fifteen million in 1971.[1]

The presence of these migrants has shaken the foundation of Assamese social structure, created solidarity among the Assamese even while generating cleavages

1. The population of Assam (present boundaries) in 1901 was 3.7 million. Had Assam's population increased at the same rate as the rest of India from 1901 to 1971 (132%) her population would now be 8.6 million rather than 15 million, a difference of 6.7 million. Actually, the proportion of migrants and descendents is substantially greater since large scale migrations into the state commenced in the middle of the 19th century. Accepting the 1891 Census estimate that one-fourth of the population of the Brahmaputra valley was then of migrant origin we can estimate that the migrant population and its descendents in 1971 were more like 8.5 million as against an "indigeneous" population of 6.5 million.

economic aspirations of countless Assamese, determined their central political concerns, and became a decisive factor in the periodic restructuring of the state's boundaries. Migration to Assam has given rise to powerful assimilationist and nativist sentiments and backlash separatist agitations, to massive conflicts over language, education and employment policy, and to political cleavages that have led not only to the intervention of the central government and the use of the army, but also affected Assam's relationship to neighboring Bangladesh, formerly East Bengal and, hence, India's relationship to Pakistan. In short, migration has been a force for social, cultural, economic and political change. The process by which these changes have been brought about is the concern of this paper.

Assam is by no means a "typical" area for studying the relationship between local populations and migrants from which one can generalize to other regions of India. To the contrary, it is an extreme case since it has had and even now[2] continues to have the highest in-migration rate among the states of India. But as such, it provides us with an opportunity to see the problems that arise from inter-state migration in a low-income region with greater clarity than elsewhere ; for here varied ethnic groups and the state and central governments have had to face issues that few other states in India have encountered in such acute form. Moreover, precisely because it is the state that has had the highest rate of in-migration, an examination of its experience should lead us to understand problems and policy choices that may arise elsewhere, in India , if and when in-migration grows.

Finally, the case itself is intrinsically interesting and an important one for India because of the strategic importance of a state that borders on several countries, has, in recent years, felt the brunt of an invading Chinese army and experienced the influx of refugees from Bangladesh, and, a generation ago, was a staging area for British and American troops flying the hump to Chungking and fighting Japanese forces on the Burmese border.

The Political Geography of Assam

Contemporary Assam is only a small portion of what was termed Assam only a few decades ago. Today, Assam consists of nine districts containing 30,408 square miles.

2. Between 1961 and 1971 the population of Assam increased by 34.7% as against 24.8% for India as a whole primarily because of migration. Assam's growth rate was exceeded only by the union territories of Delhi, Chandigarh, the Andaman and Nicobar islands and by several small states surrounding Assam that had until recently been union territories, Manipur and Nagaland. Percent variation of population of India and Assam has been as follows :

	1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41	1941-51	1951-61	1961-71
Assam	16.8	20.2	20.1	20.5	20.1	35.0	34.7
India	5.7	−0.3	11.0	14.2	13.3	21.6	24.6

Most of the population lives in two valleys—the predominantly Assamese-speaking Brahmaputra valley, with about 12.5 million people, and the predominantly Bengali-speaking Surma valley, with 1.7 million persons. Between the two valleys are the Khasi and Garo Hills, once part of Assam and now of the newly created state of Meghalaya. To the north is Tibet and a sparsely inhabited mountain region known formerly as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency) and now as Arunachal Pradesh. In the northwest, Assam touches the independent kingdom of Bhutan and to the southwest is Bangladesh. A small tip of western Assam touches a narrow corridor of West Bengal that constitutes Assam's only physical link wiih the rest of India. Eastward lies Burma, the state of Nagaland (previously a part of Assam) and the state of Manipur. To the south lies the Union territory of Mizoram (until recently a district of Assam) and the predominantly Bengali state of Tripura.

The Brahmaputra valley contains, in addition to the Assamese-speaking inhabitants, a large migrant tea plantation population that came largely from the state of Bihar, and a substantial migrant population from what is now Bangladesh. The Surma valley consists of the single district of Cachar with a Bengali-speaking population.

The Assamese often think of themselves as a "forgotten" and "neglected" state within the Indian Union and as a neglected people in danger of being overwhelmed by migrant peoples and of being absorbed by neighboring states. This sense of being apart has long historic roots.

In India's middle ages Assam had, under the Ahoms, held a distinctive place. Though Moghul power spread across northern India, following the path of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers into Bengal, the Ahoms successfully resisted incorporation into the Moghul empire. To this day the Assamese speak with great pride of their resistance to "Muslim aggression", and to the successful spread of Hindu Vaisnavaism throughout Assam's Brahmaputra valley in the 16th century under the influence of the great Hindu sage Sankaradeva, at a time when Muslim influence elsewhere was at its zenith. It had then a substantial Tibeto-Burman speaking population linking it to regions both to the north and east. And its cultural links with the rest of India, even with the growth of Vaisnavism and the spread of Aryan speech of the Assamese to the governing Ahoms, remained tenuous.[3]

British rule came late to Assam. The British did not move into Assam until 1826 when they dislodged the Burmese who had conquered the province in 1819. The extension of their control over the north east region was a slow process lasting upto the 1870s. (But even under British rule, Assam remained a peripheral region). After their

3. For an account of Assam's connections with the rest of India from the 13th to 19th centuries, see Suniti Kumar Chatterji, The *Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India*, Gauhati : University of Gauhati, 1955. The standard history is E. A. Gait, *History of Assam*, Calcutta : Thacker. Spink and Co., 1905 (Revised edition 1963).

occupation, the British had incorporated the area into the province of Bengal. It was in 1874 that Assam was separated from Bengal and was administered by a Chief Commissioner. Not until the last decade of the 19th century was the area given the status of a self-contained state responsible directly to the Viceroy.

At the turn of the century, in 1905, a new reorganization took place that was to have a lasting influence on the attitude of Assamese towards migrants from the neighboring areas of East Bengal. At that time the British partitioned the sprawling densely populated province of Bengal into a predominantly Bengali Muslim province in the east which incorporated Assam, and a predominantly Bengali Hindu province in the west. There followed a bitter hostility from the Bengali Hindus who reseated tlis partition of their province and from the Assamese who resented incorporation into a portion of Bengal. In 1912 the British annulled partition, reunited East and West Bengal and re-established Assam as a separate Chief Commissioner's province that now included the predominantly Bengali Muslim district of Sylhct and the predominantly Bengali Hindu district of Cachar. These new boundaries were to remain intact until the partition of India, and of Assam in 1947. Pre-partition Assam thus consisted of the two valleys, the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills, and Mizo Hills, and Sylhet district.

With the inclusion of Sylhet district, Assam was demagraphically, and politically, precariously balanced between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. The 1937 elections had produced a minority Muslim League government under Mohammad Saadulla which, except for a one-year interlude of Congress rule, governed the state until the close of the World War II. The Saadulla ministry had aroused fears among Assamese that the entire province might be incorporated into the Muslim state of Pakistan, a fear made more credible by the increasing influx of Bengali Muslim migrants into the state in the late thirties and early forties.

In the elections of early 1946, the Congress party had won an absolute majority in the state legislative assembly. A British Cabinet Mission proposal to create a predominantly Muslim zone in eastern India that would include Assam was rejected by the Congress Party Ministry. When British put into effect the partition scheme creating Pakistan with its eastern and western provinces, Assam remained with India but the Muslim majority district of Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan, following a referendum in the district.

Even without Sylhet, Assam, after 1947, remained one of the most diverse cultural regions in the sub-continent. It included three groups of native peoples : The Assamese speaking Hindu population residing primarily in the Brahmaputra valley ; hill tribes—the Garo, Khasi, Naga, Mikir and Mizo-speaking diverse languages, of Mongoloid stock, racially and culturally akin to the tribal peoples of Southeast Asia ; and indigenous plains tribals believed to predate the Assamese Indo-Aryans, known as the Bodo or Kachari.

The migrant communities included : Tribal laborers, employed in the tea gardens, from the Chota Nagpur region of Bihar and Orissa, mainly belonging to the Santal, Oraon and Munda tribes ; Bengali Muslims, settled along the Brahmaputra valley and, to a lesser extent, the Surma valley, mainly from the East Bengal district of Mymensingh (hence, their name, the Mymensinghias); Bengali Hindus, settled in Cachar district and the towns of the Brahmaputra valley, originating from East Bengal and especially from Sylhet district; Marwaris, an entrepreneurial community from Rajasthan, engaged in trade, commerce and money-lending, and, more recently in a few industries and many tea plantations purchased from the British ; and a scattering of other migrant communities such as Nepalis, settled in the low-lying hills around the Brahmaputra valley, tending cattle; Bihari males operating as seasonal workers in construction projects and casual workers in the towns; and a small but economically significant number of Punjabis working in the transport industry, and more recently, in their own businesses.

This mosaic was partially taken apart by the Indian government after 1961. The rebellious Naga tribes were given their own state of Nagaland (1963). The Garo, Khasi and Jaintia tribes were given autonomous status as Meghalaya which was subsequently (1972) made into a separate state. The Mizo district was separated from Assam in 1971 and constituted as a union territory of Mizoram. The North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was converted into a union territory, then declared the state of Arunachal Pradesh (1972). The two remaining hill districts, the Mikir Hills and North Cachar districts, decided to stay out of Meghalaya and remain in Assam ; the Bengali Cachar district also remained in Assam, though there were serious proposals to merge Cachar with the predominantly Bengali state of Tripura.

While the creation of separate tribal states has reduced some of the cultural heterogeneity of Assam, it has also brought the tensions between the indigenous Assamese and the migrant communities into a sharper relief. Both are now proportionately larger. If we apply the 1961 census figures to the reorganized state of Assam, we find that 62.3 per cent of the population speak Assamese as the mother tongue and another 7.4 per cent speak one of the local tribal languages, while Bengali is the mother tongue of 19 per cent of the population, and Hindi of 4.6 per cent. In 1961, approximately 3 million, or 28 per cent of the population, spoke the languages of other states or neighboring countries, mainly Bengali and Hindi, but also Nepali, Oriya and the tribal languages of Bihar and Orissa, Santali, Oran, and Munda.[4] There is reason to believe

4. For readers not familiar with India's linguistic pattern, we note that Indians live in eighteen states and several union territories, each of which contains a linguistic majority. State boundaries coincide with linguistic boundaries, though there are a few states in northern India that share a common language (Hindi) and a few linguistic groups that straddle state boundaries. Migration from one to another state, therefore, takes on some of the characteristics of international migration but without the accompanying legal hurdles. Since their reorganization in 1950s, many states have a considerable degree of linguistic homogeneity—in Kerala, Malayalam is spoken by 95% of the population ; in Gujarat, Gujarati is the language of 90.5% ; in Bengal, 84.2% speak Bengali, in U.P. 84.7% speak Hindi and in Andhra 86% speak Telugu. The corresponding proportion of those speaking the major language of the state is, among the states, the smallest for Assam.

that this figure is low and the figure for Assamese speakers high, since Bengali Muslims[5] tend to report Assamese as their mother tongue. Moreover, many descendents of tea plantation laborers who came to Assam decades ago are now Assamese speaking, or at least so report themselves. Finally, 11 per cent of the population belongs to scheduled tribes, while only 7.3 per cent report they speak tribal languages; a large number of plains tribals (Bodo or Plain Kachari) apparently report \ssamese as their mother tongue. The controversies between migrants and the native population have been so intense that census figures with respect to both language and migration must be viewed as crude approximations which really underestimate the number of non-Assamese speakers.

What has been, and continues to be, the response of the indigenous Assamese to the migrant populations? We shall focus on four migrant communities—the tea plantation migrants, the Bengali Hindus, the Bengali Muslims, and finally the small but economically influential Marwari community.

Tea Plantation Migrants

Failure, like success, can have many causes. A man may succeed because of his skill, the appearance he makes, his drive, luck, and the opportunities available to him. In a stable hierarchical social order it is ordained : boys, more or less, will do what their fathers and uncles did. Until the middle of the 19th century, the Assamese social order was stable. There were higher castes and lower castes men with power and wealth, and men without; but there were few, if any, who moved from one category to another. Few men sought to change their social status by seeking new occupations, for apart from living in a tradition which discouraged men from moving upward, there was little opportunity to do so.

The coming of the British introduced a change. The steamy vardant hills, hitherto ignored by Assamese peasants, were converted by the British into rich tea plantations whose products were soon to reach out to markets across the seas thousands of miles away. In 1821, tea was discovered in Assam by an Englishman and in the 183Gs the Governor-General Lord William Bentinck took steps to create a tea industry in Assam. Within a few decades tea became a booming business with gardens in Lakhimpur, Darrang, Kamrup, and Cachar districts.

In the beginning, the one major obstacle to creating a tea industry in Assam was the lack of an adequate local labor supply. Diseases, civil conflict, and the Burmese invasions had depopulated much of the province. For the local Assamese cultivators,

5. 26 percent of Assam's population is Muslim, making it second only to Kashmir as India's major Muslim state. The Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley (2.2 million) report their mother tongue as Assamese, though most are Bengalis, while the half million Muslims of Cachar district report Bengali as their mother tongue. If we reallocate the Muslims of the Brahmaputra valley, the Assamese speakers are reduced to 42% and the Bengali speakers, increased to 30% ; figures likely to attract a violent (literally !) reaction from some Assamese.

there was little incentive to work as low income wage laborers in unhealthy jungle terrain as they were comparatively prosperous for there was much land.

The British first thought of solving their labor problem by importing Chinese coolies from Singapore; it was assumed that the Chinese, whatever their background, knew how to cultivate and prepare tea! Several hundred Chinese coolies were brought from Singapore to the port at Calcutta, then sent upland to Assam. En route, the Chinese apparently engaged in a brawl with some Indians. Sixty were arrested and jailed by a local magistrate and the remainder refused to go on alone to Assam until their compatriots were released. The entire group, their contracts cancelled, were returned to Calcutta where, in their anger, they proceeded to be a nuisance to the local police. The Assam Tea Company, reporting to the London office, noted that :

> "these men. . . were turbulent, obstinate and rapacious. Indeed they committed excess which on occasions endangered the lives of the people among whom we had sent them and it was found almost impossible to govern them. So injurious did they seem likely to prove that their contracts were cancelled and the whole gang with the exception of the most expert tea makers dismissed."[6]

Thus ended the project to colonize the tea plantations with overseas Chinese!

Finding an alternative source of labor did not prove easy. Laborers were imported from other parts of India, first from the Chittagong region of East Bengal and later from the hill areas of southern Bihar, but the mortality rate was apparently appallingly high. Cholera was rampant, and few escaped the fever. "No wonder," wrote one historian, describing the attitudes of the young English officers shortly after they arrived in the unhealthy jungle, "we could hardly expect anything but despair, irritability, illness and often a speedy death."[7]

A system of contract labor was established. The British employers recruited indigent tribesmen from the hill areas of southern Bihar, a region known as Chota Nagpur, paid their transportation and provided them with housing and medical care in return for a contract which indentured the laborer to his employer. By the turn of the century there were *764 tea* gardens in Assam employing 400,000 persons producing 145 million pounds of tea per year. The number of migrants to the plantations soared even higher between 1911 and 1921 when the tea industry imported 769,000 laborers; another 422,000 came during the following decade.

Migration rose again during the second world war when Assam tea garden laborers were employed by the American and British armies to build roads and aerodromes for defence against a possible Japanese invasion from Burma.[8]

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6. Quoted by Harold H. Mann, "the Early History of the Tea Industry in North-East India," *The Assam Review*, September 1934, p. 10.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. The large number of airports now scattered throughout the Brahmaputra valley is a legacy of this early construction boom.

A considerable amount of assimilation has taken place. The children of migrants attend schools conducted in Assamese. Many of the tribals now observe Assamese Hindu rituals, especially the Bihu festivals that are so central to Assamese cultural life.9 According to the 1961 census, only 204,000 persons reported a tribal language of Bihar and Orissa (Santali, Oraon, Munda or Sadan-Sadri) as their mother tongue, though clearly the number of migrant tribals is considerably larger. The 1921 census estimated that migrants to tea gardens and their descendants numbered a million and *a* third, one-sixth of the total population of the province.[10]

A substantial number of the tea garden laborers have now become ex-tea garden laborers. Some have settled as cultivators, either as land-holders or tenants in land provided by the Government. Others have found employment in construction industries. Of the 38,000 construction workers in Assam, 21,000 are migrants. (Almost all the remaining construction workers in Assam are Khasi tribesmen, a non-Assamese speaking ethnic group from the Khasi and Garo Hill districts that are now part of the state of Meghalaya. Technically, therefore, even the Khasis working in Assam as construction laborers are migrants.)

The tea plantation migrants have never been nor are they now economic, cultural or political threats to the Assamese. The jobs they hold are not those sought by the Assamese. Their tendency to assimilate linguistically makes them model migrants to the Assamese. And though there are trade unions among the tea plantation laborers, they play no significant role in the politics of the state. Nor are the tribal migrants in day-to-day social contact with the Assamese, for those who live on or near the tea plantations are physically removed from contact with the local population. A number of laws and rules-the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, and the Assam Plantation Labour Rules of 1956, require that plantation owners provide housing accommodation, dispensaries and hospitals, creches for the children of women workers, and schools for children who work on the plantations. Canteens for meals and recreational facilities must also be provided by employers. The effect of these provisions is to limit routine contacts between tea garden workers and the Assamese.

Bengali Hindu Migrants

Early in their administration, the British sought to make use of high ranking officials from the previous Ahom government, especially in revenue administration and the judiciary. But these officials did not readily fit into the Anglo-Mughal administrative structure created by the British. They had never kept written records; even judicial proceed-

9. i'or contemporary account of the economic and social conditions of the tea plantation workers see Social and Economic Processes in Tea Plantations with Special Reference to Tribal Labourers, *Census of India 1961,* Vol. I, Part-A, New Delhi, 1970. See especially Part II, an account of the Dejoo Tea estate in Lakh'impur district (pp. 32-71). For an historical account of the development of the tea industry in Assam see E. A. Gait, *op. cit.,* Chapter 23, pp. 404-414.

10. E. A. Gait, *op. cit.,* p. 414.

ings were conducted without recording the statements of witnesses, complainants or defendants. Moreover, the new administrative offices and titles, such as *tahsildar* or district revenue collector, were adapted from British governance in Bengal rather than based on indigenous Ahom administrative structures. In consequence, the British increasingly imported trained Bengali officers to work in Assam. David Scott, the agent of the East India Company in Assam expressed his concern that Ahom and Assamese functionaries were rapidly losing their position of wealth and power as more and more Bengalis came in, but he "was equally aware of the extreme difficulty of local officials competent to serve the company."[11] Scott proposed that a system of indirect rule be established which provided for the nobility and the low ranking officials of Assam, but the East India company doubted the capacity of a native government to maintain order among the various tribes on the frontier and had no intention of permitting a weak and possibly hostile state to stand between itself and the frontier. On rejection of Scott's proposal, the British officer in upper Assam, Captain J. B. Neufville, proceeded to remove from his administration the many Assamese nobles that Scott had employed.

> "The indolence and incapacity of the nobility, the impossibility of making them account for the revenues they collected without the use of duress, led Neufville to introduce *tahsildars,* who were all natives of Bengal. Neufville also removed from office not less than a hundred *kheldars* who were in charge of revenue collection, and in their place employed various foreigners or Assamese clerks of inferior rank who, he thought would be real 'men of business.' Neufville declared that he could find no nobleman in the country capable of conduction of the business of a tahsildar entrusted with the task of collecting and regularly accounting for even 30,000 rupees."[12]

And so the Bengalis came. First they moved into administrative positions. Then, coming from the first social group in India to study at the British-created missionary and government colleges, they entered the modern professions. By the beginning of the 20th century the doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, clerks, railway and post office officials, as well as officers of the state government, were Bengali Hindu migrants.

Since there are few differences between the Bengali and Assamese languages and the scripts are similar, the Bengalis ware able to persuade the British government that Assamese was only a corrupt and vulgar dialect of Bengali, a "patois bearing to it the same relation which Yorkshire bears to the literary English, and that it ought in no way to be encouraged, but to be crushed out as quickly as possible, by using Bengali as the official tongue and teaching it in schools."[13] For more than a half century of British

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11. Nirade K. Barooah, *David Scott in North-East India: A Study in British Paternalism,* Munshirara Manoharlal, 1907, p. 137.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

13. E. A. Gait, *Census of India, Assam, 1892* (Vol I, Report), Shillong, 1892, p. 157, describes not his own views but those of other government officials.

rule, this viewpoint dominated. It was not until 1871 that the Assamese, with the support of American missionaries settled at Sibsagar, persuaded the government to recognize Assamese as a separate Language and to use it as the medium of instruction in schools throughout the Brahmaputra valley." By the 1880s, it was used in the primary schools, but the middle schools were still conducted in Bengali since teaching materials were not yet available.[13] So long as Bengali was a medium of instruction, Bengali young men flocked into an expanding educational system and continued to move into an expanding administrative system. Soon, the Assamese perceived themselves as having two sets of alien rulers.

Educated Assamese in the late 19th century were resentful not so much of Bengali domination in the Administrative services but of the effort of the Bengalis to treat them as culturally inferior provincial cousins. It is true that leading Bengali intellectuals "discovered" Assamese literature, its classical content in the form of Boranjis or chronicles, Assamese translations of Sanskrit poems, and many indigenous Assamese literary works, but the legacy of this early effort at Bengalization of the Assamese remained.

The rise of an Assamese middle class in the 20th century moving into positions that were previously the monopoly of the Bangalis did not stop the Bengali Hindu influx. Migration continued even after the separation of Assam from Bengal. At the same time, Bengali Hindu from Sylhet and Cachar districts in Assam freely took jobs in the Brahmaputra valley.

In 1961 nearly a million of the seven million people living in the Brahmaputra districts were Bengalis. 57% or 43,000 out of 75,000 persons employed in transport, storage and communications (census categories which include railways, post and telegraphs) were migrants, and one-third of all persons listed by the census as having other "service" occupations (139,000 out of 424.UOO) migrants. Neither of these figures include the descendents of Bengali Hindu migrants, nor do they reveal the extent to which the high-paying positions were held by Bengali Hindus.

The persistent dominant position of Bengalis in middle class occupations in Assam is indicated, moreover, by their concentration in urban areas, especially in the Brahmaputra valley towns. Of 913,000 urban dwellers in Assam, 350,000 are Benga li, whereas only 304,000 are Assamese. Assamese speakers constitute 33.4 per cent of the urban population as against 37.9 per cent Bengali and 13 per cent Hindi speakers. In some towns in Goalpara, Darrang and Nowgong districts, Bengalis comprise over 40 per cent of the population. Alternatively, approximately 5 per cent of the Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley live in the urban areas as compared with 40 per cent of the Bengalis.

~~14. Bengali had been made the language of the courts and schools in Assam as early as 1837. After an extensive period of controversy in the 1860s, Assamese was officially restored in 1871 by an order of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell.

15. Gait, *Census of India* (1872), *op. cit.*, p. 157.

Bengali Muslim Migrants

Throughout the 19th century, Assam was regarded as an area with large virgin tracts, not only with forest lands to be cleared, but also with rich arable land along the Brahmaputra river. Considering how densely populated the nearby province of Bengal even then was, it is rather surprising that Assam had remained an area of low density. One likely explanation is that Assam had a high mortality rate and a reputation for unhealthiness.

John Butler, an officer of the Assam Light Infantry in the middle of the 19th century, has given us an account of Assam in which he says that in portions of Goalpara district, "the mortality both of Europeans and natives, equals, if it does not exceed, that of any district in Assam .... Unless endowed with great stamina, life is here frequently extinguished by jungle fever in the course of a few days."[16] Apart from disease, he writes, "there is a painful sense of insecurity from the streams and rivers in many parts of Assam swarming with crocodiles. Natives, when bathing, are not infrequently seized by crocodiles, and I have heard that one of these amphibious monsters has been known to seize a paddler unsuspiciously sleeping in the front part of the board .... Moreover, an apothecary, who had long been attached to the Assam Light Infantry assured me that pythons or boa-constrictors were very numerous in our vicinity, and of an immense size, some not being less than fifteen or eighteen feet in length . . ,[17]

Malaria fevers and the plague continued to take a heavy toll of life in Assam well upto the end of the 19th century. A district officer in Nowgong District[18] reported that in his district the indigenous population decreased by 30 per cent from 1891 to 1901. "Not a single British district in the whole of the Indian Empire lost so large a proportion of its population as the unfortunate district of Nowgong" he concluded.

With the gradual improvement of public health, Bengali Muslim cultivators began to move into the Assam districts of Sylhet and Goalpara from the East Bengal districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur. But by the end of the century, the migrations were still modest: the 1891 census reported only 45,000 East Bengal migrants from those two districts out of the 510,000 migrants in the state, 83% of whom worked in the tea gardens.

The major influx of Bengali Muslims appears to have begun after 1900. While the growth rate of Goalpara district had only been 1.4 per cent in the entire decade from 1881-1891, and only 2 per cent in 1891-1900, it jumped to 30 per cent for 1901-1911. By

16. *A Sketch of Assam with Some Account of the Hill Tribes, by an Officer,* London : Smith, Elder and Co., 1847 (by John Butler), p. 3.
17. *Ibid., p.* 8, 13, 20.
18. B. C. Alien, *Nowgong Assam District Gazetteer,* Calcutta, 1905, pp. 66-67. See also the Imperial Gazetteer of India, Provincial Series : Eastern Bengal and Assam, Calcutta 1909, pp. 45-46 for estimates of population *decreases* in Nowgong, Kamrup and portions of Da rrang districts in the 1880s and 90s, largely as a result of endemic malaria.

1911, there were 118,000 migrants in the district of Goalpara alone, constituting nearly 20 per cent of the population. The 1911 census commissioner wrote, in a statement, quoted frequently by Assamese, that the migration was "likely to alter permanently the whole future of Assam and to destroy more surely than did the Burmese invaders of 1820 the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilization."[19]

The following decade, the census reported that the east Bengali settlers had moved up the Brahmaputra valley, and formed 14 per cent of the population of Nowgong district and were rapidly taking up waste lands in Kamrup. "Almost every train and steamer brings parties of the settlers and it seems likely that their march will extend further up the valley and away from the river before long."[20]

The 1931 census report described the influx in military terms :

> "The second army corps which followed in the years 1921-31 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed the conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely but the few thousand Mymensinghias in North Lakhimpur is an output which may, during the next decade, prove to be a valuable basis of major operations.[21]

> "Where there is waste land thither flock the Mymensinghias. In fact the way in which they have seized upon the vacant areas in the Assam Valley seems almost uncanny. Without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the district revenue staffs, a population which must amount to over half a million has transplanted itself from Bengal to the Assam Valley during the last twenty-five years. It looks like a marvel of administrative organization on the part of Government, but it is nothing of the sort: the only thing 1 can compare it to is the mass movement of a large body of ants."[22]

The movements of Muslims into Assam continued through the 1930s and 40s (abetted, many Assamese claim, by the Muslim League government), reportedly rising during the Bengal famine of 1942. The migrations continued even after East Bengal (including Mymensingh) became part of Pakistan and international borders were interposed between Assam and East Bengal. In 1951 the Census Commissioner, Mr. Vaghaiwalla, wrote that though post-Independence migration figures were not available, "I have personally seen hundreds of persons coming by trains during the first months I held the charge of Goalpara district. I had the same experience as Deputy Commissioner in Cachar during 1948-1949 when hundreds of Muslim immigrants regularly

19. Cited by R. B. Vaghaiwalla, *Census of India, 1951,* Assam, Manipur and Tripura, Part I-A, Report, Vol. 12, Shillong, 1954, p. 72.
20. *Ibid.,* p. 72.
21. *Ibid., p.* 73.
22. *Ibid., p.* 73.

travelled by the hill section railway from Badarpur to Lunding, in order to go to the Assam Valley for settlement."[23] In 1961, the Muslim proportion of population of Goalpara had reached 43.3 per cent, Nowgong 41.2 per cent, Cachar 39.2 per cent and Kamrup 29.3 per cent.

The impact of these Muslim migrants on land uss in Assam has been considerable. Between 1930 and 1950 some 1,508,000 acres, mostly in the Brahmaputra valley, were settled by immigrants.[24] While some government officials, reflecting the political sentiment of many Assamese, feared the influx, others pointed to the contribution made by the migrants to the development Assam's agriculture. In 1921, Mr. Bentinck, Deputy Commissioner in Kamrup, wrote :

> They have reclaimed and brought under permanent cultivation thousands of acres which the local cultivators had for generations past merely scratched with haphazard and intermittent crops or recognized as exigent of efforts beyond their inclination. The large undulating expanses of Char lands to be seen in late March or early April finely harrowed, weeded and newly sown are something to which the spectacle of ordinary Assamese cultivation is quite unaccustomed. They have, besides their industry, shown examples of new crops and improved methods.[25]

A decade later, P. G. Mukerji, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong (a district which was rapidly becoming the most Muslim district in the valley) wrote :

> They have opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the Brahmaputra and have occupied nearly all the lands which are open for settlement in this tract. These people have brought in their wake wealth, industry and general prosperity of the whole district. They have improved the health of the countryside by clearing the jungles and converting the wilderness into prosperous villages. Their industry as agriculturalists has become almost proverbial and they extract from their fields the utmost that they can yield. Their care and love of cattle is also an object lesson to others. Government revenue has increased. Trade and commerce have prospered. The lakhs of rupees which annually pour into the district to buy their jute pass out of their pockets into those of the traders who sell them their food-stuffs and imported

23. *Ibid., p.* 75.

24 Annual Land Revenue Administration Reports of Assam, cited in *ibid.,* p. 81. In 1964 the net acreage sown in the two valleys was a little more than five million of which 4.6 million was in the Brahmaputra valley. There is no reason to believe that many of these migrants were temporary soujourners like many of the tea plantation laborers. They invariably brought their entire families as far as we can ascertain from census data. The 1931 census reported that of the 338,000 migrants from Mymensingh, nearly half or 152,000 were women.

25 *Ibid.,* p. 77- The citation is from the 1921 Census of Assam, p. 41.

goods as well as into those of the lawyers and mahajans (money lenders) who look after their litigation and finance.[26]

But what was provided as benefits by some was seen by Assamese as imposing costs. The census commissioner of 1951 wrote :

> These benefits naturally were derived at a price. Their hunger for land was so great that in their eagerness to grasp as much land as they could cultivate, they not infrequently encroached on Government reserves and on lands belonging to the local people from which they could be evicted only with great difficulty. In the beginning they had their own way and there was some friction with the indigenous population who did not like their dealings as neighbors. Afterwards, when the land was not so abundant, their land hunger brought them into many conflicts and struggles in the economic sphere with the tribals and other indigenous people of Assam."[27]

Why did this massive movement occur?

Firstly, East Bengal, especially Mymensingh district, from which such a large proportion of the migrants came, was, and continues to be, one of the most densely populated rural areas of the world with few industries or towns, a high population rate accompanied by increased fragmentation of land holdings, and a growing number of landless laborers and marginal agriculturalists. In 1961, fifty-one million East Bengalis lived on 55,000 square miles, a density of 925 persons per square mile, while in Assam slightly under twelve million lived on 47,000 square miles, or 252 persons per square mile.[28] In 1961, 4.4 per cent of East Bengal's population lived in urban areas, as against 7.5 per cent of Assam.

Secondly, in contrast to East Bengal, Assam had in the past at least substantial virgin lands, some in easily flooded low-lands along the Brahmaputra valley that are similar to the deltaic areas of East Bengal. Assam also has substantial forest reserves (unlike East Bengal) that can be exploited, often illegally, by land-hungry migrants.

Finally, the movement was facilitated by the contrasting land tenure of the two regions. East Bengal had (until shortly after Independence) a land holding system in which large numbers of tillers were tenants or under-tenants to large landowners (known as *zamindars)* or to intermediary absentee rent collector, while Assam was a

26. *Ibid.*, p. 77. The citation is from the 1931 Census of Assam, p. 51. Note that these two statements on the benefits of Muslim migrations are by an Englishman and Bengali, respectively.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
28. A more satisfactory comparison is with the Plains Division of Assam where density is (1961) 432, higher than the all-India average, but still half the density of East Bengal.

region of individual small landowner cultivators *(ryots)* who paid revenue directly to the state government.[29]

To these considerations, several political factors should be added. Many Assamese claim that the Muslim League government which controlled the state before and during the war allowed and even encouraged, Muslim migrants from Bengal to encroach on government lands, grazing and forest reserves, and that this came to a halt only in 1946 when the Congress Party government began to enforce revenue laws and evict unauthorized trespassers. With Partition in 1947, the flow of Muslims from East Bengal subsided, while the flow of Hindu refugees from East Bengal increased.[30]

The economic imbalances between East Bengal and Assam—at least insofar as opportunities for cultivating land are concerned-remained sufficiently great through the 1950s that even the existence of an international boundary, and the imposition of a variety of legal restrictions failed to completely stem the flow of Bengali Muslims. In 1961 the census commissioner estimated[31] that 221,000 Bengali Muslims had entered the state in the previous decade, almost all illegally.

Finally a statistical point merits attention : how many of the Muslims now residing in Assam are of the Assamese rather than Bengali origin? Without cross tabulations for religion and migration, there is no way of knowing how many of the Muslims are migrants, or of migrant origin. Presumably, the proportion of indigenous Muslims is small, comprising the descendents of Moghul prisoners of war and a small number of converts of migrants of the Moghul times.[32] According to census, in 1891, 8 per cent of population of the Brahmaputra valley was Muslim (but a large portion of these were already Bengali Muslim migrants). In 1961, the corresponding figure was 24 per cent. So, it appears that around two-thirds of the Muslims are migrants who came after 1891.

29. For an account of the land system of Assam, see Narendra Chandra Dutta, *Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam* (Delhi : S. Chand and Co., 1968). Dutta reports that 10.5% of the total rural households in Assam belonged to the agricultural labor class in 1950 as compared to the all-India average of 30.4% (p. 119). In the last two decades there has been a substantial increase in the number and proportion of agricultural laborers in Assam largely as a result of rapid population growth.
30. The 1951 census reported 274,000 refugees, more than half of whom came in 1950. Virtually all Bengali Hindu migrants came from East Bengal, where they constituted the gentry class in a Muslim agrarian society.
31. Since illegal migrants obviously incorrectly reported their place of birth to census enumerators, this estimate is based on the census religious leturns. The difference between an estimate of natural increase and actual increase of Muslim population is assumed to represent Muslim migration from Pakistan.
32. According to H. K. Barpujari, the earliest known Muslim settlements in Assam date to 1662. Some were employed by the Ahom royal court in deciphering Persian documents, carving inscriptions, minting coins, manufacturing gun powder and serving as tailors and silk weavers. Moghul works of art apparently found favor among members of the Ahom royal family and gentry. *(Assam : In the Day of the Company 1826-1858* Gauhate : Lawyers Book Stall, 1963).

Marwari Migrants

"The natives of Rajputana are the shrewd Marwari merchants who have succeeded in monopolizing practically the whole of the trade of the Assam valley." So wrote B. C. Alien at the turn of the century."

The number of Marwari migrants was not comparatively very large. The 1891 census reported only 4,877 migrants from Rajputana. But the Marwaris played an important role in opening up Assam to trade. They acted as money changers, bankers and general agents to the managers of the tea-gardens, especially in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts, operated the mustard trade in Kamrup and Goalpara districts, and, throughout the state, sold hardware and other articles imported from other parts of India and became dealers in rice and grains. The Marwaris served as bankers not only for agriculturalists but for officers of the government. Though criticized and abused, as are traditional meney lenders everywhere, the Marwaris did play important economic role.

Though their numbers continue to remain small,[34] the Marwaris are among the most visible of the migrant communities. Today Marwaris are among the major business community in Assam, dominating trade, commerce, banking and credit. In a drive through the main industrial area of Gauhati, one passes a flour mill, an automotive tyre distributor, a bus transport company, a tea warehouse, a steel-iron works, a car distributor, an aluminium factory and several petrol pumps, all Marwari-owned. Though found also in small towns, the Marwaris are heavily concentrated in the larger towns where they manage the major bazars. The Fancy Bazar[35] in Gauhati, probably the largest bazar in northeastern India, is run predominantly by Marwari merchants. The Marwaris have their own charitable organizations, hospitals, several Hindi-language newspapers, and Hindi-medium achools; they are thus not only economically better off than most Assamese, but their institutions and bazars make them notably conspicuous and therefore vulnerable.

The Assamese Response

Thus, the new opportunities created by the opening of Assam and the extension of British influence were exploited not by the Assamese but by migrant communities.

33. B. C. Alien, Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. VII. (Sibsagar, Allahabad : Pioneer Press, 1906), p. 75.
34. Marwaris originally come from Rajasthan, but they are found throughout northern India : so the statistics on migration from Rajasthan into Assam grossly underestimate the number of Marwaris. The 1961 census reported 22,000 migrants from Rajasthan, with a sex ratio of 360 females, suggesting that most migrants are not permanent settlers. One prominent leader of the Marwari community estimates that there may be as many as 20,000 Marwaris in the city of Gauhati.
35. This is not an English name, but a corruption of the Hindi word, *fanshi,* meaning *hanging,* since located near the bazar was the jail where hangings took place. The local post office is still called the Fanshi Bazar Post office.

Tribals from Chota Nagpur became the labor force in the tea plantations. The British managed the gardens and, with the help of Marwaris established the tea trade. The Marwaris became the entrepreneurs, traders and bankers. The Bengali Hindus dominated the administrative structure and became the professional classes in the cities. Some became shopkeepers in the towns and larger villages. The Bengali Muslims developed the virgin lands and forests. Soon, even some of the tea garden laborers colonized land as independent cultivators. Others came too : Nepalis as herders, rubber tappers and cultivators ; artisans from the Punjab ; peasants from U.P. and Bihar to work as carters and coolies; and even Kabuli traders from as far west as Afghanistan.

For large numbers of people in northeastern India, especially in Bengal and Bihar, Assam was a land of opportunity where one could find a job, start a business, cultivate land and do better than at home. And the question remains : why were the Assamese unable, or unwilling, to similarly avail themselves of these opportunities?

One reason is that what was percsived as opportunity by others was not often seen as opportunity by the Assamese. The Assamese were not blind to new opportunities, but some of the new economic activities were not in fact opportunities for them. For an agricultural laborer or marginal cultivator in Bihar, a low wage in the industry represented a real opportunity, but not for the Assamese peasant. Similarly, a land hungry Bengali peasant was prepared to clear forest lands or to cultivate crops on flood lands adjacent to the Brahmaputra, while the Assamese cultivator often had as much land as he or his sons could manage with the existing technology.

Secondly, the Assamese were largely unequipped to take advantage of some of these new opportunities. They lacked the education which the Bengalis had acquired, and it was a long time before many Assamese saw the advantages of going to secondary school and college. For moving into entrepreneurial and banking activities, the Assamese lacked the skills and vast contacts of the Marwaris with networks of trade and finance throughout northern India.

One could argue, of course, that a more enterprising people would have risen up to meet these new opportunities. Moreover, even if enterprise, foresight and such other characteristics were absent among the Assamese in the beginning of the 19th century, surely by the end of the 19th century many Assamese should have learned from the experiences of the migrants and begun to successfully compete with them. Such a view was widely held by British officials throughout the 19th century, who in their blunt Victorian fashion wrote of "the utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit, and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people."[38] Perhaps migrants, wrote an officer of the Assam Light Infantry in a hopeful vein in 1847, might "stimulate the natives to increased exertions."

36. John Butler, *Sketch of Assam, op. cit.*, p. 34.

> In many parts of the province, coal of a good quality is found; and indeed the soil of Assam generally may be considered extremely rich: it abounds in valuable products, such as rice, sugar-cane, moongah silk, pepper, mustard-seed and cotton. But the bounty of nature is marred by the indolence and apathy of man: the cultivator seldom looks beyond his immediate wants, and makes no attempt to improve his condition. In fact, in agricultural, commercial and manufacturing industry, this country may be considered at least a century behind Bengal; and there seems little prospect of improvement, excepting by the introduction of a more active and industrious people, who might stimulate the native to increase exertions.[37]

This view is indeed shared by many Assamese. Professor Das of the Gauhati University, for example, has written of the "lethargic existence of the present-day population," which he attributes to the climate of Assam, it "being very damp and humid (and) not very congenial for continuous labor. Rather, it is extremely suitable for the growth of vegetation. So, while the people in Assam enjoyed great material prosperity, the ease of life depleted their physical and moral strength."[38]

It was, in any case, clear that the Assamese were unable to compete effectively with either the Bengali Hindus or the Marwaris, while they became increasingly fearful of the Bengali Muslim cultivators. The efforts of a small articulate Assamese middle class to persuade the government to drop Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools succeeded in 1860s. A decade later the restoration of Assamese in the schools and in the courts removed an important impediment to Assamese mobility. The establishment of Cotton College in Gauhati at the turn of the century provided new opportunities for Assamese young men, though it was as much of an attraction to Bengalis settled in Assam. Individual Assamese did, of course, move into higher education and into urban employment; but, by and large, few Assamese "made it". In the absence of large scale individual achievement we begin to see, starting in the 1920s and taking on a new form in the 1950s and 1960s, a collective political response on the part of the Assamese middle class.

By arguing that the response was collective and political rather than individual and economic, it is not suggested that the choice was a conscious one; it was simply a res-

37. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

38. H.P. Das, *Geography of Assam* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1970), p. 12. Though Professor Das and Major Butler might agree that the 'culture', 'character' or 'moral condition' of the Assamese account for their failures, they offer different explanations. For Professor Das, a geographer, it was a matter of climate, (though the climate of East Bengal is surely as enervating as the climate of Assam). For Butler, it was'the widespread use of the opium by the Assamese which accounted for their behavior *(Ibid.,* p. 134). Isolating the ingredients of the culture or environment that accounts for an achievement or non-achievement orientation continues to absorb the attention of contemporary scholars and remains as controversial an issue as ever.

ponse to what an increasing number of Assamese perceived as their humiliating status, their inability to remedy it through individual economic success, and their recognition of the potential uses of political power.

The Assamese and the Bengalis

Many politically articulate Assamese[39] explain their comparative backwardness as a consequence of political factors. They point to the success of the Bengali Hindus and Muslims as a consequence of political circumstances. The Bengali Hindus, it is argued, took advantage of their dominant position in the British administration. They not only moved into Assam with the British, but they persuaded the British to establish Bengali as the official language of Assam along with English, to establish schools in Bengali, and to treat the Assamese as culturally subordinate and inferior to the Bengalis. As for the Bengali Muslims, (though their large scale migrations had started shortly after the turn of the century), hadn't the Muslim League government encouraged Muslim cultivators to migrate to Assam and illegally occupy government reserve forest lands? The Bengali Hindus, it is said, were intent upon absorbing Assam into a "Greater Bengal"; and as the prospects for the creation of an Islamic Pakistan grew, the Bengali Muslims sought to incorporate Assam within it by increasing their numbers until they obtained a majority. Thus, while the Bengali Hindus had sought to commit "cultural genocide" upon the Assamese through a process of cultural absorption, the Bengali Muslims had sought to assert their domination through the force of their numbers. The one had to be resisted by modifying the language and educational policies of the government; and the other, by restricting migration and redrawing state boundaries.

Fortunately for the Assamese, the Bengali Muslims and Bengali Hindus were unable to come together politically, for their hostility to each other was far greater than their shared antogonism to the Assamese. Ever since the British attempt to incorporate it into East Bengal, the Muslim leaders of East Bengal looked covetously upon Assam; it was territorially larger than the Muslim-majority districts of Bengal and provided land for their demographically exploding land-hungry Muslim peasants. The very existence of Assam had lent attraction to the idea of a Pakistani state.

39. The reader may wonder what my sources are when I refer to the views of "politically articulate Assamese." I have relied here heavily on the interviews I conducted with 27 Assamese-members of Parliament, the state legislative assembly, officials of the state government, journalists, and university professors in 1970-71 and in 1973. Additionally, I had casual but informative conversations, often of many hours and sometimes over two or three meetings, with dozens of Assamese in Gauhati and Shillong, and have used whatever published sources I could find expressing an Assamese point of view. I shall from time to time quote from these sources, but I am well aware of the methodological dictum, so well stated in the Yiddish aphorism, "A for instance is not a proof." Readers will have to accept on faith, as indeed, I have had to, that the people I interviewed held views that are widely shared. How "widely" is, of course, another matter and for that reason I have refrained from indicating what percentages of any of my respondents held to a particular view since such a number would suggest a degree of representativeness that these interviews do not warrant.

However, even before the Muslim League proposed a separate Pakistan, the Assamese Hindus were fearful that, thanks to the growing influx of Bengali Muslim migrants, they would be dominated by Muslims politically.

The British attempted to restrict the flow of migrants into Assam by establishing the Line System in 1920 which prevented settlement of migrants into selected, especially the tribal, areas of Assam. The restrictions were tightened by the formal establishment of a Tribal Belt by the Government of Assam in 1948 through an amendment to the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations. But these restrictions probably had impact more on the distribution of Bengali Muslim settlers than on their numbers, for the Line System, restricting settlement in the hills, forced the migrants to seek land in the plains.

Assamese fears of the Muslims intensified when the Muslim League took control of the state government in 1936. The movement of Bengali Muslims into Assam when the League was in power was viewed not simply as the continuation of earlier chain migrations reflecting persistent economic differences between East Bengal and Assam, but as a deliberate act of the League to gain a solid majority through colonization. Clashes between Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims became common and each side fought intensely for allies. Indeed, the political balance in the state legislature was for some time so precarious that the small group of the (British) tea plantation representatives held the balance.

The Congress Party in Assam, as elsewhere in India, boycotted the government during the war but was able to regain power in Assam after the war. The Assamese Hindus could count upon the support of Bengali Hindus, since they were as fearful of being incorporated into Pakistan as the Assamese. On the eve of Partition, it was agreed by virtually all the major parties that Assam should remain with India but a referendum may be held in the Sylhet district. With the creation of Pakistan, the fear of falling under Bengali Muslim domination was removed. Moreover, Bengali Muslim leaders in Assam recognized that the Partition was permanent. Some of these leaders, like Maulana Bhashani, migrated back to East Pakistan, while those who remained urged the Muslims to adapt themselves to living within a predominantly Hindu and Assamese-dominated political framework.

After Independence, there were a few communal clashes between Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims, but these were carry-overs from the past.[40] The fear of Bengali Muslim domination had virtually ended, the new cleavage was now between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindus.

To fully appreciate the impact of Bengali Hindu migration on the Assamese, we must take a broader view of the kinds of changes which have been occurring in recent

40. There were major communal disturbances in the state in early 1950. In February 1950 Parliament passed the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act which provides for the expulsion of any immigrant "whose stay was detrimental to the interest of the general public of India or of any scheduled tribes in Assam."

years, particularly since Independence, the most important being in the sphere of education. The Assamese-dominated Congress Party, that took power with Independence, was committed to using state power to improve the position of the Assamese-speaking people. The new government devoted a considerable portion of the state's resources to expansion of the educational system. The number of students increased from 934,000 in 1950 to 3,154,000 in 1965. There was a larger education explosion in the secondary schools and colleges. The number of students attending colleges and universities almost doubled every five years: from 8601 in 1950 to 14,595 in 1955; 28,226 in 1960 and 45,387 in 1965-

There was now emerging, almost for the first time in Assam, a large middle class, "middle class" by its educational attainment though not necessarily by its occupation and income. Indeed, the aspirations of this new class were middle class long before it achieved any of the material standards of middle class life.

For this aspiring Assamese middle class, it was the Bengali Hindus who stood as an obstacle to economic advancement. The new government sought to remedy this situation by quietly giving preference to Assamese over Bengalis in appointments to the state administrative services. Special attention was given to the appointment of Assamese young men in positions in the teaching profession which was the largest, and the most rapidly expanding, single occupational category in government service; between 1961 and 1965 alone, the number of teachers in Assam had increased from 42,000 to 64,000. With the expansion of government services into health and community development, there was a similar expansion in public employment.

As education expanded, language policy became the bone of contention between the Bengali Hindus and the Assamese. The state government saw the establishment of Assamese as the exclusive language of the state and the medium of instruction in the schools, as a measure benefiting young Assamese seeking government employment. Further the Assamese increasingly demanded that Bengalis in the state acknowledge the exclusive legitimacy of Assamese symbols in public life—not only the Assamese language, but Assamese cultural holidays, Assamese historic heroes, and the great events of Assamese history. Since it touched upon the issues of both employment and cultural identity, language policy became the focal point of controversy between the two communities. For the Bengalis, favouring use of both languages, a dual language policy would give equal status to the Assamese and the Bengalis, and would therefore mean equality of opportunity in employment and of political and social status. The Assamese, however, viewed dual language policy as a perpetuation of Bengali domination in both the cultural and employment spheres.

It is not easy to separate the issue of cultural identity from the struggle over access to jobs. While one could plausibly explain the conflict strictly in terms of competition for public employment on the part of the respective middle classes, the explanation

would ignore the element of cultural conflict and the deeply felt emotional content of this struggle. Certainly the Assamese would have developed a sense of their own cultural identity even in absence of large "alien" migration for regional identities have been emerging everywhere in India. While characterized the Assamese quest for a cultural identity was their need to distinguish themselves from the Bengalis in their midst; it is quite likely that the presence of large numbers of migrants from other states, especially Bengal, sharpened the sense of Assamese identity and gave it what many outsiders perceived as its peculiarly aggressive character.

As one Assamese writer, refering to the immigrants of the past one hundred years observed in 1957, "If we cannot assimilate the major part of this population into our fold by giving them our language and culture, there is danger for us."[41] Twenty-five years later, another Assamese writer concurred:

> "How will this nationality (the Assamese) be able to keep its numerical position as the majority in Assam in the face of uncontrolled and *unassimilated* immigration .... In the absence of any arrangement in the form of assimilation of immigrants into its linguistic fold or of a constitutional provision for maintaining its majority position, a weak nationality in the face of a ceaseless influx of people belonging to a strong linguistic national may face another eventuality."[42]

Three themes persistently emerged in my interviews with the Assamese. The first is that the Bengali Hindus were cultural imperialists who, if given the opportunity, would assimilate the Assamese. The second is that the Assamese tended somehow to view their nationality as weak; not only did the Assamese lag behind the Bengalis in education and employment, but the Bengali language itself was more advanced, its literary traditions were stronger and its cultural institutions, more dominating. Finally, argued these Assamese, Bengali cultural imperialism could only be met by linguistic nationalism; the very weakness of the Assamese as a nationality makes it necessary for them to pursue an assimilationist policy if they are themselves to avoid being assimilated.

Partly this sense of weakness is related to geography and numbers. Next door to Assam are West Bengal with 44 million people, Bangladesh with some 75 million people, and Tripura with 1.5 million. In all, there are 120 million Bengalis, one of largest linguistic groups in the world and numerically second only to the Hindi speakers in South Asia.[43]

41. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, in an essay "Natun Dinar Kristi" written in 1947 and cited by Bhaben Barua, *Language and the National Qestion in North East India,* Gauhati 1972, p. 5.
42. *Ibid., p.* 4,
43. In 1961 the East Bengal district of Mymensingh with a population of 7,091,000, had a density of 1,103 per sq, mile in a predominantly rural region; in 1971 the density is likely to approximate 1,400 as against a density of 493 for Assam. One can not overestimate the extent to which these demographic differences are viewed with concern by Assamese; conditioning both their anxieties toward their Bengali neighbors and affecting their attitudes toward population control policies for the Assamese.

The Bengalis are not only numerous, but they have for the past 150 years overflowed their original habitat. As an area with highly educated middle and upper classes and high rural density, it has produced an overflow both of middle class (Hindu) jobseekers and a (Muslim) peasantry. From the middle of the 19th century educated Bengalis have moved, across northern India, to U.P., Bihar, Orissa and Assam. After Partition, millions of Bengali Hindus fled from East Pakistan to West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, outnumbering in the latter the local tribal inhabitants.

Even before Partition, most of the neighbouring states took steps to sharply curtail the employment of Bengalis. In Bihar, for example, the state government in the late 1930s announced a policy of giving employment preference to local people, and though Bengalis continued to find employment in centrally administered services (such as post and telegraph and railways) they found it increasingly difficult to find jobs in the state government. In Bihar, as in most of the other states where Bengalis settled, the number of Bengalis was never great enough to threaten the cultural position of the Biharis. But in Assam it was proportionately so large that the Assamese could genuinely fear that they could be numerically, and hence culturally overwhelmed.

The large number of Bengalis settled in Assam provided a persistent attraction for Bengali friends and relatives who had not yet migrated, adding, as elsewhere in the world, an accelerating dimension to migration. If a Muslim cultivator in Mymensingh did not have enough land for all his sons, he could send one or more to join his brother or cousin in the Cachar district. If the Calcutta job market was tight, a man could send his son to Gauhati where his elder brother might find a job for him as a clerk in a bank or as an accountant in a tea plantation in Lakhimpur. And as the number of Bengali families settled in Assam, increased, it no longer became necessary to send one's son "home" to find a bride, as enough local Bengali girls were now available. Once Bengali Brahmins had settled, lower caste Bengalis found it easier to migrate too, for priests would be available to perform weddings, conduct Puja ceremonies and perform the rites for the dead. And since Bengalis occupied high posts as district magistrates, revenue collectors and police officers, the Bengali middle class, the *bhadralog* or "gentlefolk" as distinct from the *chotalog* or "little folk", felt some security in knowing that whenever needed, there was someone in the bureaucracy to whom they could turn for assistance.

Bengali migrants felt comfortable in Assam. They had their own Bengali schools, or they could send their children to English medium schools. They had their own Bengali newspapers. In their own localities, in their place of work and in government offices, they could speak their own language. And their numbers were sufficiently large for conducting the Puja ceremonies that are at the core of Bengali cultural life, social identity and religious expression.

These very elements, contributing to the Bengali migrant sense of security, made the local Assamese feel increasingly insecure. Would the Assamese have to speak Bengali

when they spoke with a Bengali government official ? Would their children find the Bengali Pujas, with their colorful images, processions and elaborate tents, more exciting than the Assamese Bihu holidays ? Would they and their children have to learn Bengali, while the Bengalis remained ignorant of the Assamese? Would Calcutta be the magnet for their young men seeking higher education, and would an extended stay in Calcutta destroy a student's Assamese identity, turn him into a Bengali in speech, manners and feeling ?

Everywhere he turned, the Assamese found the Bengali in a superior, and himself in a subordinate, position. The teacher is Bengali, the pupil Assamese. The doctor is Bengali, the patient Assamese. The pleader is Bengali, the client Assamese. The shopkeeper is Bengali, the consumer Assamese. The government official is Bengali, the petitioner Assamese. One would hardly expect Bengalis not to look upon the Assamese as subordinate human beings and for the Assamese to feel the stare, the tone, the gestures of condescension.

Soon, every slight became magnified. Why had the great Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, omitted Assam from the list of regions included in the poem that was to become India's national anthem ? Did he omit Assam because, like other Bengalis, he considered it a part of Bengal?[11] Why do Bengalis use the word *Asami* to identify one who speaks Assamese rather than the word preferred by the Assamese, *Ahomiyal* Is it because *asami* in Bengali means criminals ?[43] And why is it that only a quarter of the Bengali population in Assam speaks Assamese as a second language as compared with half the Nepali, Oriya and Hindi-speaking migrants?[46] Is it because the Bengalis do not accept the notion that Assam is the homeland of the Assamese ?

In India, exercise of political power to "correct" a perceived status and economic imbalance must take place within a narrowly prescribed political framework. The Assamese cannot bar immigration since the Constitution guarantees freedom of movement. (Exceptions made for reserved tribal areas, as noted earlier, do not benefit the Assamese in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley.) Under some conditions there can be restrictions on employment and on admissions into schools and colleges. In any event, such restrictions would not affect most of the Bengali Hindus as they were born in Assam.[47]

Language policy, on the other hand, does affect the descendents of migrants as well

44. No, said one of my witty, good humored Bengali informants, who explained that he has told his Assamese friends that the poet omitted Assam because he was unable to find a rhyming word!
45. More likely it is because the Assamese sound of *h* (which is close to the German *ch)* does not exist in Bengali.
46. According to the subsidiary language tables of the 1961 census, 58 per cent of the Oriyas speak Assamese, 54 per cent of the Nepalis, and 44 per cent of the Hindi Speakers, as against 27 per cent of the Bengalis.
47. According to the 1961 census, the Bengali speaking population of Assam (present boundaries) was 19 per cent while only 7 per cent of the population reported Pakistan or West Bengal as the place of birth; in other words, 63 per cent of the Bengali speaking population was born in Assam.

as the migrants themselves ; and it is a "legitimate" area of state intervention, justifiable on grounds other than the protection of a specific ethnic group.

Language controversies have taken a torturous course in Assam since the "Assam Disturbances" of 1960. At that time rioting occurred over the passage of an Act making Assamese the official language of the state. I shall here single out one controversy for description since an analysis of a violent clash of interests provides a sharp picture of the major actors and their respective outlooks. This conflict occurred when I was in India so that I was able to follow the newspaper accounts, pay a visit to Gauhati and Shiillong, and conduct a number of interviews.

The Anatomy of a Language Riot

In the latter part of 1972, large scale anti-Bengali riots erupted throughout the Brahmaputra valley. The dispute began in June when the Academic Council of Gauhati University, with jurisdiction extending over the Brahmaputra valley as well as the predominantly Bengali Cachar district, passed a resolution calling for the introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction, following a long-established trend in India's state universities to switch to the; regional languages. The Council made two concessions to the linguistic minorities, viz. : (1) retention of English as the medium of instruction for a period of time ; and (2) permission to students to take examination in Assamese, English or Bengali. Almost immediately, demonstrations broke out in Gauhati demanding that the option of taking examination in Bengali be withdrawn. Classes were boycotted and several students arrested for breach of peace.

As the demonstrations, led by the All Assam Students Union, spread to other towns, the Academic Council met to reverse its decision. It withdrew the option of taking examination in Bengali. The Council said that the "partial modification" of its earlier decision was done after taking note of the "various representations from the public, teachers and students' organisations."48

Predictably, there was an uproar in Cachar district. The District Congress Committee, the Youth Congress and a group of Benga li leaders agreed to seek legal remedies. One of the affiliate colleges of the University, Gurucharan College in the district town of Silchar, filed a petition with the Supreme Cou rt that the university's decision to restrict the medium of instruction to Assamese was in violation of Article 30 of the Indian Constitution on the protection for linguistic minorities. The stay order was granted.

In September, the state legislative assembly unanimously passed a resolution reaffirming the decisions of the academic councils of Gauhati University, and Dibrugarh University, the state's only other university, but at the same time resolved that a separate university be established with territorial jurisdiction over Cachar district. Some members of the assembly saw this resolution as a compromise permitting the Assamese

48. *Statesman,* 1 July 1972.

in the Brahmaputra valley to have their own universities and assuring the Bengalis that they too would be entitled to educate their children through their mother tongue ; other members supported the resolution as a step toward the separation of Cachar district from Assam.

Opposition to the resolution came almost immediately from three important political groups in the Brahmaputra valley: the All Assam Students' Union, the Action Committee of the Teachers of Gauhati University, and the Assam Sahitya Sabha, the state's paramount literary association containing some of the most important Assamese leaders. The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) declared that the assembly had "failed to give due recognition to the Assamese language" and endangered "the existence of Assam and the Assamese people." With an escalation in the rhetoric, came an ultimatum to the Chief Minister that unless the Gauhati University Academic Council decision establishing Assamese as the sole medium of instruction was reinstated, the AASU would lunch a "direct action" movement. Within a few days, violence broke out in one town after another throughout the Brahmaputra valley. Nowgong district was hit the hardest, with large scale arson and looting. The government announced a curfew in Gauhati, Dibrugarh and Nowgong, and as violence spread throughout the state, the government brought in the military to re-establish order.

At a public meeting in Gauhati in late October addressed by several former presidents of the powerful Assam Sahitya Sabha, a decision was made to broaden the student agitation into a "popular movement" to demand that the Assam assembly be called into special session to rescind its resolution. The President of the Gauhati University Teachers' Association (GUTA) in a public letter to the *Statesman* of November 6, 1972 said that his organization opposed the establishment of a separate university in Cachar "since this would be detrimental to the accepted principle of linguistic states and regional languages as the medium of higher education."

As large scale rioting and arson broke out throughout the valley in early November, officials of the central government sought to find ways to lower the tension. In a visit to Assam, the Prime Minister met a deputation from the All Assam Students' Union and urged them to call off their movement. The Chief Minister subsequently issued a statement announcing that his government had no intention of implementing the assembly resolution since "it had proven unacceptable to the people both in the Brahmaputra valley and in Cachar,"[49] and that the resolution would be reconsidered by the Assembly at its next regular session. The government, he said, would accept the recommendations of the academic councils of the two universities on the medium of instruction, and also introduce Assamese as a compulsory subject in all non-Assamese secondary schools in the state. Almost immediately, the AASU announced that the movement would be called off.

49. *National Herald,* 12 November 1972.

Just as the Assembly's decision was interpreted by Assamese militants as a step toward a multilingual Assam in which the Assamese would loss their identity, so now the Chief Minister's announcement was taken by the non-Assamese as a step toward forceful Assamization. One Bengali expressed his fear that "the recurring disturbances are aimed not at usurping the Bengali language but at driving out the entire Bengali Population from Assam."[50] Bengali leaders in Cachar denouced what they called the cultural genocide perpetrated on the linguistic minorities in Assam."[51] The Assamese, complained another Bengali, ''have developed an irrational craze for cultural conquest."[52].

These fears were shared by many Bodos, the largest tribe in the plains of Assam. The Bodo Sahibitya Sabha, a leading Bodo organization, announced that it would launch a movement to protest the government's decision to make Assamese a compulsory subject in the Bodo-medium secondary schools. The Plains Tribals Council of Assam announced that it would press for the creation of a union territory of the Bodo regions of the state. One tribal leader complained that the tribal peoples "had been forced to learn through the medium of Assamese in colleges and universities when all along they had been demanding the retention of English."[53] The Bengalis of Cachar and the plains tribal leaders soon formed a coalition organization, the Minority Peoples Rights Committee, which called for a change, in government language policy or, alternatively, a further division of Assam.

Behind the rhetoric and the political moves and countermoves clearly lay two divergent conceptions of an appropriate social contract to guide the relationshp between Assamese and non-Assamese in the state. The Assamese have been torn between two conflicting objectives. One has been to make Assam, a land in which Assamese language and culture played the same dominant role that Bengali language and culture plays in West Bengal, Tamil language and culture plays in Tamilnadu and the other regional languages in their own states, and so to reject the notion that Assam is a "miniature India", a "patchwork quilt" of a variety of civilizations.[51] The second objective was to retain control over all those territories which the British had historically annexed to Assam even though in some of these areas non-Assamese predominate.

These two objectives could only be achieved if the Assamese successfully persuaded,

50. Letter to the editor, *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 4 November 1972.
51. *Statesmen,* 23 December 1972.
52. *Amrita Bazar Patrika, 28* December 1972.
53. *Indian Express,* 3 December 1972.
54. "Aftab", a professor at Gauhati University, quotes approvingly Jawaharlal Nehru's rhetorical question posed at a public meeting in Gauhati in the wake of the 1960 language riots: "Where else but in Assam can Assamese be the official language?" And after a pause he is reported to have said derisively "In Bombay"?, followed by thunderous applause. For the Assamese, writes "Aftab", Assam is the only state, indeed the only place in the world, in which the Assamese live. "Assam: Behind the Trouble". *Frontier, 9* December 1972.

or coerced, the non-Assamese to adopt Assamese language and culture or, at a minimum, to recognize their predominance. But the more the Assamese asserted the predominance of Assamese language and culture throughout the entire state as it existed in 1947, the more the non-Assamese feared that their own languages and culture would be made subordinate, that the Assamese would be given preferences in public and private employment, and that they would be subordinate in the power structure of the state. In the result, one by one, each of the major non-Assamese groups pressed the central government for the creation of a separate political structure apart from Assam; the Nagas pressed for Nagaland, the NEFA tribes for Arunachal Pradesh, the Khasis and Garos for Meghalaya, the Mizos for Mizoram, What remained was the thinly populated tribal areas of the Mikir Hills and North Cachar Hills, the predominantly Bengali district of Cachar and the six districts of the Brahmaputra valley in which the Assamese predominated.

Thus, the Assamese efforts to assimilate non-Assamese into their political and cultural framework have contributed to the break-up of Assam into discrete cultural-political units. Many Assamese advocate taking, what they hope will be, the last step in this process of creating a predominantly Assamese political system-the separation of Cachar. Still others hope that they can impose Assamese upon Bengalis within Cachar as well as the rest of the state. (Of the nearly two million Bengalis reported by the 1961 census, 1.1 million live in Cachar and 900,000, in the Brahmaputra valley.)

The Bengalis insist that even though Assamese is the official language of the state, Bengali should be retained as the administrative language of Cachar. They also insist that Bengalis be allowed to study in their own language not only in Cachar but throughout the state. They argue that cultural and linguistic minorities in India have the right to retain their language and culture wherever they reside, under constitutional provisions ensuring the rights of minorities to establish their own educational institutions with state aid.

Moreover, the Bengalis, and earlier, the tribes residing within the then boundaries of Assam, perceived Assam as a multi-cultural, multi-lingual state with a variety of linguistic-cultural groups sharing power and wide use of Assamese, Bengali and English, English being used by tribals educated by British and American missionaries. Even with the break-up of Assam into several states, many Bengalis continue to argue that Assam remains multi-lingual state. Much of their argument is based upon an attack against the census figures reporting the number of Assamese and Bengalis in the state, particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. They argue that the enormous percentage increase in the number of Assamese speakers between 1941 and 1951 reflected a political move of Bengali Muslims to side with the Assamese, and that Assamese speakers barely constituted 50% of the population, Bengalis another 30% and tribals and others 20%.[53]

55. Subodh Roy, "The Assam Happenings: Background and Way Out," *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* 28 November 1972. Roy is the former secretary of the Nikhil Assam Bangabhasi Samiti (the All Assam Bengali Association).

"There is," concluded one Bengali leader, "only one way out of the crisis and that is recognition by the major linguistic group of the fact that Assam is a multi-lingual state."[58] To separate Cachar from Assam, therefore, would be to make the position of the Bengalis in the Brahmaputra valley even more vulnerable.

Some Assamese favour separation of Cachar district from Assam in order to match territory and language; now that Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram have separated from Assam, the progress may as well be completed. There would then remain in the Brahmaputra valley, predominantly Assamese but with substantial numbers of Bengali Hindus in the towns, Bengali Muslim peasants, tea plantation labourers, Marwari merchants, some Nepalis and a substantial number of plains tribals. "One still hopes," wrote one Assamese, "that after all the cutting and chopping that has been done in Assam over the years, a more or less homogeneous political and cultural unit will emerge and whatever inner tensions may still remain . . . will be more or less of the same kind of 'subregionalism' that 'plagues' every other state of the union."[57]

In closing this account of the cleavages between the Assamese and the Bengali Hindus, it is interesting to note the position of the Bengali Muslims, for they found themselves an unexpected beneficiary of the clash. After 1947, the Bengali Muslims became *de facto* allies of the Assamese in their conflict with the Bengali Hindus. Bengali Muslims have been willing to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction in schools. They have thrown their votes behind Assamese candidates for the state assembly and for the national Parliament. They have declared Assamese as their mother tongue. In return, the state government has not attempted to eject Bengali Muslims from lands on which they had settled in the Brahmaputra valley, though earlier Assamese leaders had claimed that much of the settlement had taken place illegally. There is thus an unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims. It is not a wholly stable coalition, however, since it could be shattered if there is a new major influx of Bengali Muslims into Assam or if Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims should coalesce.

The Assamese and the Marwaris

Hostility to Marwari migrants, and their descendents, have turned many young Assamese into socialists, just as their hostility to Bengali Hindus has turned them into cultural nationalists. To understand why, we must take a brief look at industrial development and employment in Assam.

Reliable data on per capita income, growth rates, and employment in India do not come easily ; hence, comparisons between Assam and other states must be made with great caution. Under Indian planning, there is a tendency for state governments to

56. *Ibid.*
57. M. S. Prabhakar, "The 'Bengal' Bogey", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 October 1972, p. 2142.

under report growth rates, since a low level of development strengthens their claims for central resources. Assam state leaders regularly assert that Assam is a backward state neglected by the central government. Per capita income in the mid-sixties was Rs. 279, as against the all-India figures of Rs. 339, but Assam was still above Bihar, Orissa, and U.P., areas from which migrants came, and probably above most of East Bengal. Literacy in 1971 was slightly lower than for India as a whole : 28.8% of the population could read and write as against 29.3% in all of India, but again, it was above Bihar, Orissa and U.P. Assam is considerably less urbanized than the rest of India : in 1971 only 8.4% of its population lived in urban areas as against 19.9% for all of India : Orissa and Himachal were the only less urbanized states.

Economic growth in Assam[58] has been modest. Food grain product, between 1950-51 and 1967-68 (base 1956-57=100) rose from 81 to 110, while non-food agricultural production (e.g. jute, cotton and tea) rose from 89 to 119 ; industrial production rose from 100 to 135, with the largest increase in petroleum refinery products and the manufacturing of plywood and tea chests. There has been a substantial increase in land utilization since 1951; much of the increase in agricultural production is attributable not to increased productivity but to the extention of land under cultivation. Between 1950 and 1967 land under rice increased from 1.6 to 2.0 million hectares while production increased from 1.4 to 1.9 million tons.

The major economic changes from 1950 onward were in the expansion of the supply of electricity, a doubling of road mileage, and an expansion in communications (post offices, telephones and radio receiving sets). The income of the state nearly doubled between 1950 and 1968, from Rs. 223 to 410 crores at constant 1948-49 prices, but population growth made the per capita income increases much smaller—from Rs. 255 to only 282. Factory employment has hardly increased since 1951 when there were 65,000 factory workers ; throughout the 1960s there were approximately 80,000 factory workers.

Two features of the employment market in Assam are striking. The first, as noted earlier, is the considerable expansion of school attendance, at all levels but especially at the secondary school and college level, resulting in great increase of applicants for clerical jobs registered at the employment exchanges. The second is the expansion in the number of people employed in the public sector, as school teachers or in the direct employment of the state government. A persistent feature of the growing unemployment has, therefore, been the demand by students for greater access to employment in

58. These and subsequent statistics on the economy of Assam are taken from the following reports: Department of Economics and Statistics, *Assam Through the First Five Year Plans—Selected Economic Indicators,* and *Estimates of State Income of Assam,* Shillong, 1970 ; Directorate of Economics and Statistics, *Report on the Sample Survey of Employment and Unemployment in Urban Areas of Assam,* Shillong, 1963 ; Department of Labour, Government of Assam, *Memorandum of the Government of Assam to the National Commission on Labor,* Shillong, 1968 ; Department of Economics and Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Assam, 1967-68,* Shillong, 1970.

the state services and in the public sector, and demand by the state government in turn to the central government for greater public sector investments.

In an effort to increase employment for Assamese, the state government has asked all industrialists in Assam to hire "local" people for all jobs paying a salary of up to Rs. 500. In June 1972, there was a demonstration against the central-government supported research laboratory at Jorhat, led by the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), demanding that all jobs carrying a salary of less than Rs. 500 a month be reserved for the Assamese. This was one of a series of state-wide "bandhs" for pressurising the central government to locate industries to process Assam's resources within the state.

An earlier agitation led to location of a central refinery and petro-chemical complex in the state, irrespective of contrary opinion of many economists and engineers. There were agitations by employees at the Oil Refinery at Gauhati against the policy of transferring senior engineers and administrators from Indian oil plants outside Assam on the grounds that higher posts should be filled by promotions within the plant. There was also agitation against the public sector petro-chemical complex at Bongaigaon for advertising for posts in newspapers in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta without doing so in the Assam newspapers. The Indian Petrochemical Corporation at Bongaigaon agreed to set up a local office to deal exclusively with hiring of technicians and engineers from within Assam.

The state government also expressed its concern that the head offices of public and private industries located in Assam were outside the state, like those of the Fertilizer Corporation of India, the Indian Oil Corporation, the Indian Petroleum Corporation and of many tea agencies. As more and more educated Assamese sought urban employment, they increasingly felt blocked by "foreign" domination of the commercial and industrial sectors.

In non-household manufacturing industries, 50,000 out of 103,000 were migrants and a large number of the remainder can be presumed to be the descendants of migrants rather than native Assamese. Similarly, migrants accounted for 55% of a total labour force of 38,000 in construction ; 50% of 183,000 in trade and commerce ; 55% of 75,000 in transport, storage and communications (mainly in railways and post and telegraphs) ; and about 33% of 424,000 in other services. Thus :

> In absolute numbers migrants are a majority or near majority in manufacturing, construction, trade and commerce and transport and communications.
> Assamese are less likely to take positions as non-agricultural workers than are migrants.
> A very substantial proportion of employers in controlled services-railroads, post and telegraphs and various centrally controlled departments-are non-Assamese.

Employment in other services (mainly state government) is more likely to be "local", though one should include in the "local" category all those born in Assam, including a majority of the Bengali Hindus.

The Assamese middle classes, and most of the Assamese political leaders, attribute these conditions to the fact that most of the industries, trade and commerce, and tea plantations are owned by non-Assamese businessmen. The Marwaris have become a symbol of "foreign" domination, though the number of other entrepreneurs, especially Punjabis, has been increasing steadily. Assamese complain that Marwari businessmen and shopkeepers do not employ enough Assamese, a charge accepted by many Marwaris who deplore that Assamese are lethargic, unwilling to work long hours as do Marwaris, and are not reliable and "trustworthy" employees. In the mid-1960s, local politicians and college students increasingly criticized Marwaris for their "failure" to provide employment to local Assamese. Violent clashes occurred in several urban centres, notably in Gauhati where bands of young men smashed and burned shops throughout its Marwari dominated Fancy Bazar.

This so-called foreign domination has led many Assamese to press for an expansion of the public, as opposed to the private, sector. The state government continues to welcome private investment, but much of its effort has been directed toward pressing the central government to expand public sector investment, especially in the petroleum industries and in raw material oriented industries like paper, pulp and cement. It has also sought public sector investment in the creation of fertilizer factories, exploitation of natural gas, and the expansion of transport facilities.

State socialism, implying the expansion of public sector investment, is supported by all Assamese political parties and social groups, including the small business community. For, in this context, socialist ideology represents not a demand for a fundamental restructuring of political and economic life or a demand for greater income equality within Assamese society, but rather a desire to give employment preferences to natives as distinct from those belonging to immigrant communities.

There are currently plans for creating a refinery and petro-chemical complex at Bongaigaon, a paper mill at Jogighopa, a cement factory at Bokajan, a petrochemical complex at Namrup and a sugar mill in Cachar, all of which, so the government hopes, will improve the employment situation in the state. The prospects on the employment front are not, however, as favorable. Some of the public sector industries (e.g. petrochemical) are capital, not labor, intensive. Moreover, these centrally controlled investments follow a national recruitment policy for high skilled jobs, so that even the establishment of more public sector (or, for that matter, private) plants has a limited impact in producing employment for the Assamese. In any case, a policy of prefering local people for certain posts does not assure positions for the Assamese, since locally born Bengalis also qualify, and are often more qualified.

Nor have the Assamese been willing to seek employment outside their state. Of the major linguistic communities, the Assamese are among the least mobile in all of India. In 1961, only 19,000 or 0.3% of the total Assamese-speaking population in India lived outside of Assam ; nearly half of them, in Nagaland, Manipur and NEFA. By comparison, 5.5% of the Malayalies, 7% of Tamilians, and 15.5% of Punjabis live outside of their "native" state.

Conclusion

Assam is but a single case yet, it does help us understand some of the tensions and problems which arise when migrants move into superior economic positions and the ways in which the local population attempts to exercise political power to redress the balance. We summarize the process in a series of proposition :

1. *The establishment of new economic opportunities within an area does not necessarily benefit the local population.* For the better part of the past century, it has been migrant rather than native population which has taken advantage of new opportunities : the extension of land use, the establishment of the tea industry, the growth of commerce and industry and the expansion of employment in government and professions.

2. *The inability of the indigenous population to effectively compete with migrants is the result of a complex set of historical, social, demographic and cultural circumstances.* Features of the land system combined with comparatively low rural densities and a comparatively prosperous agriculture slowed the pace of urbanization. British administrative policy favoured the education and employment of Bengalis *vis-a-vis* Assamese, and Assamese culture and social structure has not produced an indigenous entrepreneurial community.

3. *The indigenous populations especially the politically articulate and numerically expanding urban educated class seeking middle class employment, sees its failure to achieve equality of income as a consequence of political factors.* The Assamese blame the British for giving the Bengalis a head start, Muslim politicians for encouraging Bengali Muslim migrations, and Bengali Hindus and Marwaris for using their superior economic positions to prevent Assamese from effectively moving up the occupational and income ladder.

4. *The indigenous elite, on acquiring effective political control attempts to use the political instruments for equalizing the position of the indigenous population.* These instruments include the establishment of informal preferences for Assamese in employment, a language policy intended to improve the competitive position of the Assamese, and coercion or threats of coercion against both Bengali Hindus and Marwaris. *For the Assamese government and political elites, the objective of policy and politics is the achievement of equality of income, and status—not equality of opportunity.*

5. *The indigenous leadership is not adverse to forming coalitions with migrant communities prepared to support its political objectives.* The Assamese have soug ht and won the support of tea plantation workers and Bengali Muslims in their conflicts with Bengali Hindus and Marwaris. *Cultural differences between the Assamese and the migrant tribals and Bengali Muslims have not proven to be an impediment to a political coalition.*

6- *In spite of governmental policies there is no evidence that migrants have ceased to enter, or that migrants or their descendents have begun to leave, the state. Neither ethnic differences nor government policies have thus far proven to be a barrier to migration.* For one thing, Assam continues to provide opportunities to outsiders ; for another, migration streams are so well established that residents from other states can turn to their friends and relatives within Assam to help them find employment and housing. Other things being equal, one assumes that migrants would prefer to seek employment in the liguistic region in which they live, but the persistently high migration rates into Assam suggest that for many people in neighbouring states, Assam continues to be a land of opportunity.

The theme of this essay has been the impact of migrants as an instrument of social change, not on the migrants themselves but on the social and political order into which they move. There can be little doubt that migration has been an important instrument for the economic development of Assam. Migrants have produced a tea industry with links to world markets; established a small industrial base in oil, petrochemicals and forest products; developed trade with the rest of India, bringing consumer goods produced elsewhere in the country and the world; given legal and medical professions, and schools and colleges; opened new lands, and, to a small extent, improved the technology of agriculture.

To say all this is not to denigrate the role played by some Assamese entrepreneurs, educators and bureaucrats in the development of the state. But in the main, the Assamese have not produced a class of people capable of producing work for others. Nor have they responded to the pressures of a contracting land-man ratio in agriculture by adopting new technologies to increase productivity. The emerging middle class continues to remain dependent upon others, outside private entrepreneurs and central government bureaucrats, to generate the productive activities on which to base a modern industrial economy.

Societies based upon status do not readily find a place for people who are not members of the local community ; strangers are more acceptable if they are subordinate to a privileged local class which provides protection in exchange for some required economic services. Just as a society giving importance to skills and a free choice of occupations implies spatial mobility, so does a system of status imply immobility. In spite of the influx of migrants, the Assamese remain a predominantly non-mobile people in a status-based society. Not only have few Assamese left Assam, but there is remarkably little mobility within Assam itself. According to the 1961 census, only 3.5 per cent of the

population of Assam lived outside of the *district* in which they were born, and this figure includes also the non-Assamese speaking people born in the state.

It is not surprising, then, that the assimilative powers of the Assamese are so limited. So long as the level of modernization among the Assamese remains low, economically successful migrants are likely to remain unattracted to a culture practised by a people largely out of tune with the modern world.[69] There is here an elementary human response of successful people finding it disdainful to assimilate themselves linguistically and culturally into a local people, no matter how numerous, who are economically so unsuccessful and subordinate.

The migrant communities themselves, especially the Bengali Hindus, Marwaris Punjabis and Nepalis, believe they have the right to preserve their own cultural heritage' wherever they reside, a "right" constitutionally legitimized through the Linguistic Minorities Commission which has the responsibility of reporting To the President of India any violation of their right to preserve their own language in the school system. Illiterate, less assured migrants are more likely to assimilate, and this we see among the tribals from Chota Nagpur and, for somewhat different reasons, some of the illitrate Muslim peasant migrants from what is now Bangladesh.

What of the future ? Assam's economic growth is inextricably linked to that of India as a whole, but let us consider the social and political consequences of a low growth (or stationary) economy versus a model of more rapid growth.

If the economy continues to grow at the low rate of the past few decades (only slightly above the rate of population growth), then unemployment among the Assamese is sure to increase. There may be a substantial expansion of investment in petroleum and natural gas as world prices on fossil fuels continue to rise, but these capital intensive investments are not likely to create substantial employment. And with growing unemployment (especially with a middle class expanding to incorporate the educated sons of the upper peasantry eager to move from agriculture to higher status non-laboring salaried occupations), the Assamese political leadership is likely to seek political support by attacking the non-Assamese, who in an economy of limited growth, will continue to be seen as a barrier to Assamese employment. It will also be politically attractive, though economically irrational, to attack alien entrepreneurs for the profits they extract' and, in some instances, repatriate to other parts of India. It may also become increasingly popular to attack the central government for its "neglect" of the region.

Should there be a substantial expansion of Assam, either public or private (more likely the former than the latter), it does not follow that migration will decrease or that

59. Among the more exotic sights in Shillong, until recently the capital of Assam, are long-haired Khasi young men playing rock music on electric guitars. For educated migrants, and for many educated natives Calcutta is the cultural *mecca* less for its Bengali culture than for its links to the Western world.

employment for the Assamese will substantially increase. To the contrary new opportunities for employment in Assam, unless matched by rapid economic growth in the nearby states and in Bangladesh, will be a magnet to further migration leading to increased competition between the Assamese and the migrants. Under such conditions, it seems likely that the Assamese political leadership, and the middle class from which it comes, will press hard for preferential employment as opposed to open competition, a position likely to generate conflicts between the state and central government over employment policies as well as between the Assamese and the migrants.

Migrant communities, and their descendents, have a limited capacity to fight back. The Marwaris and other business communities may choose to invest elsewhere in India; some migrants, no longer trusting the impartiality of the police, may meet force ; Bengali Hindus in the Surma valley may press for the secession of Cachar district; Bengali Hindus in the Brahmaputra valley may attempt to build a broader coalition with non-Assamese communities or, if Cachar is removed, become a sullen minority.

So long as the Assamese are unable to compete effectively in the employment and investment market against non-Assamese who remain culturally distinct, it seems likely that the Assamese will continue to remain nativists in their politics and protectionists in their policies. Regional antagonism to the central government, socialists attack against the alien business community and aggressive cultural nationalism in relation to linguistic minorities are variant political orientations of a people who suffer from status deprivation, feel culturally threatened, and lack the skills and outlook to compete in the economic market place.